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ABSTRACT

This study examined the use of employer satisfaction surveys in the field of teacher education at a state university. Specifically, the issues addressed were whether new graduates' ratings of their job performance could substitute for direct employer satisfaction ratings, and if ratings of individuals by their supervisors yielded similar results to ratings of new graduates in general. A total of 66 students who received undergraduate degrees or certifications in education during 1996-97 and were working as full-time contracted teachers in spring 1998 completed a survey of their perceptions of their preparation in 23 competency areas. Additionally, 304 principals, including 43 principals of the specific students who completed surveys, completed a survey regarding their perceptions of new education graduates in general. Results indicated that new teachers and their principals had very different perceptions of their preparation for teaching with significant differences between the groups on seven of eight preparation areas. Results suggest that, within the field of education, institutional researchers cannot rely upon graduates' opinions of their preparation for employment as a substitute for employer surveys. (Contains 8 references.) (DB)

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The Effect Of Method On Assessing Readiness For Employment In the Field of Education

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-Ninth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held in Seattle, Washington, May 30-June 3, 1999.
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Dolores Vura
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The Effect Of Method On Assessing Readiness For Employment

In the Field of Education

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to help guide institutional researchers as they tackle surveys of employer satisfaction. Specifically, the issues addressed were whether new graduates' ratings of their job performance could substitute for direct employer satisfaction ratings, and if ratings of individuals by their supervisors yielded similar results to ratings of new graduates in general. The study was limited to the field of teacher preparation at one large state university. Results indicated that new teachers and their principals had very different perceptions of their preparation for teaching. However, ratings of new teacher education graduates in general differed very little from ratings of specifically named graduates.

The Effect Of Method On Assessing Readiness For Employment

In the Field of Education

As higher education proceeds further into the age of accountability, increasing demands are being made for data showing institutional effectiveness. Much of this push comes from outside the institution and includes accreditation agencies, state boards, and legislators. One of the more common requests is for employer satisfaction data or similar measures that indicate the institution's graduates are ready for employment. For example, as part of an extensive study of performance funding conducted by the Public Higher Education Program at the Rockefeller Institute of Government, researchers found that state policy makers and campus representatives shared many of the same preferences for performance indicators. Employer satisfaction surveys were one of the measures generally considered the most appropriate (Serban, 1998).

While external constituencies and campus leaders may consider this a straight-forward request and a valid measure of institutional effectiveness, those who must gather and interpret the data know that this is not necessarily so. Numerous choices must be made and each carries the researcher down a somewhat different path.

The first choice is whether the institution can simply survey its graduates about their current jobs and how well they were prepared for their work or whether they must survey employers instead of or in addition to graduates. Many institutions already conduct alumni surveys. Including questions about job preparation is quick and efficient. In addition, the argument can be made that who knows better than the graduates themselves about their job preparation.

Many argue, however, that employers themselves should be surveyed (e.g., Banta et al., 1996). One reason is that employers may have a perspective on the graduate's job performance that the graduate lacks. Another reason is that legislators simply want their constituents—employers—to know that their opinion is important.

If the decision is made that employers must be surveyed, how should they be surveyed? Will a survey to employers asking in general how well recent graduates were prepared suffice? Or must the longer route be taken of asking graduates where they are employed, seeking their permission to contact their employer, and then asking their specific supervisor about their job performance?

Asking about a specific individual rather than a general "average" for all individuals can make a difference. Holding positive perceptions about individuals while simultaneously holding negative perceptions in general is a well documented psychological phenomena. In other words, people often do not generalize positive

perceptions of individual relationships to the larger group to which the individual belongs (e.g., prejudices about a group such as African Americans, Mexicans, gays, or welfare recipients may persist despite liking or even admiring an individual representative of that group). Another example is public K-12 education where survey respondents typically decry the state of public education while simultaneously professing that the education their children are receiving is quite adequate. When respondents are asked to rate the nation's schools they are most likely rate them as average or failing. Yet when parents or educators are asked to rate their own schools they most often give them high marks (Langdon, 1998).

In addition, most of us have observed or directly experienced the impact one negative experience can have on perceptions of what has otherwise been positive. Though an employer may have hired ten graduates, if one of them is unprepared, that employer may conclude that graduates in general are unprepared because of the power of that one negative experience. Though the university has graduated 3,000 well-prepared students, if one is found to be lacking in basic communication skills, the story of that one graduate is what people will pass along.

The issue of general or specific ratings is particularly relevant for institutions such as metropolitan universities or community colleges who are in partnership with the community, drawing much of their enrollment from the local population and in return seeing most of their graduates employed within the community. The college or university is often familiar, therefore, to many community members, and, as the old saying goes, sometimes "familiarity breeds contempt." If the institution has an image problem, institutional researchers should probably ask themselves how much general ratings are reflective of this perceived image and how much they are a valid measure of graduates' actual performance on the job.

While employer satisfaction studies are fairly common, and are even mandated in some states, studies that offer comparisons between alumni and employer ratings of alumni preparation are still rare (Smith & Wilson, 1992; Womble, 1993). Rarer still are studies of systematic cross-validation of ratings (Annis & Rice, 1992; Raymond et al., 1993). North Carolina State University Planning and Analysis (1995) has probably conducted the most comprehensive comparison of employer and alumni preparation ratings. They found that employers generally rated the alumni higher in terms of preparedness than alumni rated themselves. In fact, there was very little agreement between employers and alumni on individual ratings of preparedness.

Even less literature was found that compared employers' ratings of specific graduates compared to ratings of recent graduates in general. Both approaches are found separately in the literature, but nothing was found that compared the two approaches.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to see (1) how similarly new graduates and their supervisors rate their performance, and (2) how closely employers' ratings agree when asked about specific graduates and when asked about new graduates in general. As an indirect way of assessing the impact of one negative experience on ratings in general, mean general ratings were compared based on the number of graduates hired to see if hiring more graduates was related to lower ratings. In addition, we wanted to see how much response rates varied when employers were asked about specific people and when asked about graduates in general. Did the survey generate a higher response rate when a specific name was attached to it?

Methodology

The study was limited to the field of teacher preparation at one large state university. This subject area was chosen specifically because anecdotal information indicated that school system administrators believed the university's graduates were not well prepared to teach. Others, of course, contended this was not the case.

To address the issue, it was agreed that new graduates would be contacted and, if teaching, asked about their perceptions of their preparation. In addition, they would be asked if we could contact their principals to gain their perceptions of the graduate's preparation. A survey was developed with several College of Education faculty that covered the 23 competencies for new teachers that the state had produced. The competencies covered the areas of instructional planning (4 items), instructional approaches (4 items), learning environments (4 items), evaluation of student competency (2 items), application of technologies (2 items), students as learners (3 items), professional development (2 items), and parent/colleague/community relations (2 items). Respondents were asked to indicate if they were unprepared (1), somewhat prepared (2), largely prepared (3), or fully prepared (4).

A total of 243 students who received undergraduate degrees or certifications in education during 1996-97 were contacted in the spring of 1998 and asked what they were currently doing. About 60% returned their surveys and 46% (or 66 students) indicated that they were full-time contracted teachers within the first year of completing their degree. This group completed ratings on their educational preparation. They also were asked for permission to

contact their principals and 80% (52) agreed. Of the principals surveyed, 80% responded within the six week period that ended the school year.

An additional group of 492 principals from the areas that hire most of the university's graduates were surveyed in Fall, 1998, regarding their perceptions of new education graduates in general. Surveys were returned by 304 or 62%. The group included the 43 principals who formerly responded to the survey about specific graduates. For this group, 19 or 44% responded to the second survey.

All three administrations of the survey showed high internal consistency reliability for the survey as a whole. Where only a few items were included in a sub-scale, reliabilities dropped but still generally remained acceptable at .70 or above (see Table 1).

Table 1. Internal Consistency Reliabilities for the three survey administrations

Survey scale:	Teachers' ratings	Principals' specific ratings	Principals' general ratings
Total (23 items)	.934	.953	.951
Instructional planning (4 items)	.806	.904	.879
Instructional approaches (4 items)	.829	.898	.834
Learning environments (4 items)	.864	.934	.892
Evaluation of student competency (2 items)	.773	.814	.732
Application of technologies (2 items)	.936	.943	.950
Students as learners (3 items)	.859	.872	.836
Professional development (2 items)	.877	.802	.717
Parent/Colleague/Community Relations (2 items)	.789	.697	.815

Group comparisons were conducted using analysis of variance and a .05 level of significance. For the principals who supplied both specific and general ratings, a paired-groups t-test was employed. The dependent variables were total score (sum of ratings on all 23 items) as well as the eight sub-scales. Each was standardized to have a mean of 100 and standard deviation of 10 to facilitate comparisons.

Graduates' vs. Employers' Ratings

Results indicated that new teachers and their principals had very different perceptions of their preparation for teaching. Of the eight preparation areas included in the survey, new teachers and their principals had statistically significant differences in seven of them. In addition, summary scores for the two groups differed significantly ($F=16.06$, $df=1,105$, $p=.0001$). In every case, principals saw new teachers as more prepared than new teachers saw themselves (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparisons of Teachers' and Principals' Preparation Ratings

Area of Preparation:	Teacher Mean	Principal Mean	F-ratio	Pr>F
Instructional Planning	97.78	103.30	8.39	.0046
Instructional Approaches	98.60	102.08	3.18	.0776
Learning Environments	97.31	104.01	12.85	.0005
Evaluation of Student Competency	96.96	104.53	16.97	.0001
Application of Technologies	96.84	104.74	17.51	.0001
Students as Learners	98.18	102.77	5.58	.0200
Professional Development	97.94	103.07	6.82	.0104
Parent/Colleague/Community Relations	96.10	106.04	31.21	.0001
Total Rating	97.03	104.42	16.06	.0001

These differences were not orderly, i.e., principals who rated their new teachers the highest were not matched with new teachers who also rated themselves highly. The Pearson product-moment correlation of the teacher's and the principal's overall preparation scores was statistically non-significant ($r=.03$). The same result was found for correlations within each area.

Principals' Specific vs. General Ratings

The key question was whether or not the 43 principals who gave ratings of specific education graduates would give similar ratings when asked to rate education graduates in general. Calculating difference scores for the 19 principals who responded a second time and testing for a mean that was significantly different from zero yielded no significant differences for the total difference mean or for mean differences in any of the eight areas except one

(parent/colleague/community relations, t=2.46, df=16, p=.0256). Since the sample size was small, it is difficult to know whether the power was simply not great enough to detect true differences between the two sets of ratings or whether no true differences existed. Means for specific ratings were somewhat higher in most areas, though non-significant.

Only 19 of the 43 responded to the second survey, thereby introducing the possibility that the responding group was not representative of the whole. Comparing the means for principals who returned the second set of ratings and those who did not on the specific ratings of graduates indicated that no total score mean difference existed between the two groups. Two significant differences were found when tests were conducted for the eight preparation areas: instructional planning (F=8.26, df=1,42, p=.0064) and instructional approaches (F=4.67, df=1,42, p=.0366). In each case, the principals who did *not* respond to the second survey gave higher ratings than those who did respond. The overall evidence is weak, however, for a consistent bias between the respondents and non-respondents.

In addition, a comparison of means between principals who responded to both surveys and those who only received and responded to the second survey asking for general ratings showed no significant differences for the overall mean or for means in any of the eight sub-areas. In other words, the principals were similar in their perceptions, whether they responded to the first survey or not.

If one negative experience with a specific graduate unduly influences ratings in general, then we might expect to find that the more graduates a principal reported that he/she had hired, the lower the ratings since they had had more opportunities to hire a graduate who was unprepared. Again, however, the evidence did not confirm this hypothesis. Principals who reported hiring only one graduate in the past three years had mean ratings which did not differ significantly from principals who hired two or three graduates or from principals who hired four or more either overall or in the sub-areas. The one exception was in teachers' preparation to apply technology (F=3.27, df=2,89, p=.0429). In this case, the fewer graduates hired, the higher the mean score. In addition, no relationship was found between number of graduates hired and whether the university's education graduates were rated as less prepared, better prepared or similar to graduates from other universities (χ^2=1.179, df=4, p=.882).

Given the preponderance of the evidence, we must conclude, therefore, that asking for general ratings of graduates should produce about the same results as asking for ratings of specific graduates. The response rate, however, was higher when principals were asked to rate specific graduates compared to graduates in general.

Conclusions

These results indicate that within the field of education, institutional researchers cannot rely upon graduates' opinions of their preparation for employment to serve as a substitute for surveys of employers. In this case, employers (principals) saw the graduates as more prepared than graduates (teachers) saw themselves. There are several possible reasons for this finding. One reason may be the "imposter effect," so named because of the frequent feeling among first-year teachers that they are just pretending to know what they're doing in running a classroom. Another possible reason for the discrepancy was the timing of the survey. It was given at the end of the academic year when teachers were most likely to be reviewing all the things they hadn't accomplished. Also, teachers and principals simply may not be communicating about how well the teacher is performing, and this might help explain the lack of correlation between teachers' and principals' ratings.

These findings, however, reaffirm the results of a university-wide survey of undergraduate alumni and their supervisors conducted by University Planning and Analysis at North Carolina State University (1995). In their study, little agreement was found between ratings of employers and alumni. They too found that alumni provided lower ratings than employers did and suggested further research to determine the underlying reasons.

Results of this study indicate that institutional researchers may be on safe ground in asking for ratings of "graduates in general" instead of naming specific graduates. However, while this may work in education where pinpointing supervisors is relatively easy and the job role of teacher is fairly uniform, similar results may not be found for other majors such as business. Response rates may be higher when names are used, assuming employers are not asked to rate too many graduates. Before any strong conclusions can be drawn, it is recommended that the study be replicated using graduates from other fields and increasing the sample size.

The purpose of this study was to help guide institutional researchers as they tackle the difficult area of employer satisfaction. Though results from education may not generalize to all other majors, education is typically a "hot spot" that legislators and others are interested in. And because of continual presses for accountability in public education and the documented lack of confidence in the public education system in general, this study provides an opportunity to look at one of the more extreme examples of issues in the area of employer satisfaction.

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